

EXPLORE



The quarterly magazine from AONTAS, the National Association of Adult Education

aontas

Adult Learners' Festival 2008

Celebrating Learning, Promoting Adult and Community Education
And Making Learning Matter !



Note from the Editor

This issue of *Explore* takes a look back at the second Adult Learners' Festival and the various activities that made up the week. From a packed conference centre at Dublin Castle, to promoting adult and community education at events around the country, to communicating the priorities in the policy arena to elected representatives, the key message this year was 'Learning Matters.' All of the activities, whether they used drama, or dance to celebrate the achievements of adult learners, or if they simply provided the opportunities for information over a cup of coffee, illustrated how learning does matter. Simply put, it improves the quality of our lives, our relationships, the communities where we live, and the future of our economy.

Articles in this issue both acknowledge the progress made but highlight the challenges ahead. Berni Brady considers the progress, challenges and frustrations of communicating that message over the past ten years. Reports from Local Links around the country give some indication of the level of enthusiasm and activity that went into organising events – and the increased interest in adult education that they generated both locally and nationally.

The Adult Learners' Festival is still in its infancy. As part of its current strategic plan, AONTAS is committed to supporting its establishment as an annual event. As one of the spokespersons commented, the event really is important, not only just in terms of celebrating the achievements of the sector, but also in raising the profile of a sector which is often overlooked, lacking co-ordination and still drastically under resourced.

Next year will be a critical year for the Festival, particularly in advance of the local elections. Help us make it a success – this issue has tons of ideas as to how you can mark the week and be part of a national campaign.

Over the past few weeks we have been delighted to receive photographs from events around the country – unfortunately due to space constraints we cannot include all of them in this issue. We will upload them onto the website www.adultlearnersfestival.com over the coming weeks. Thanks to all who got involved this year, through organising events or by acting as local links.

Special thanks also to DCTV (Dublin Community Television) who produced the DVD which accompanies this issue, and which captures some of the activities which took place over the week.

Until next time

Niamh Farren,
Communications Officer
AONTAS

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Festival Dates Announced

We don't let the grass grow under our feet at AONTAS, and are already making plans for next year's Adult Learners' Festival. In keeping with our aim of establishing the festival as an annual event, next year's event will run from February 2nd to February 6th. Over the coming months AONTAS will start planning the festival together with the Festival Steering Committee.

The Local Links promote festival events in their local media, enthuse groups to organise events and liaise with AONTAS about activities that are happening in their area. Following on the success of the AONTAS Local Links Day last year, AONTAS will organise a similar event to provide training and support to anyone interested in taking on this role. The Festival Local Links will again be an important part of the development of the festival. If you want to find out more about what being a Local link involves, or have ideas about activities for the festival, please contact us on 01 406 8220, or email mail@aontas.com.

AONTAS AGM

Elections for the AONTAS Executive Committee will take place at the Annual General Meeting on Wednesday 7th May 2008. The AGM takes place at the Royal Dublin Hotel and starts at 11am. Nomination forms for election to the Executive Committee must be returned to AONTAS by 5.00pm on

Wednesday 9th April. The following positions are up for election this year: 4 Positions for the Officer Board; 5 Positions as Ordinary Members and 1 Position as an Individual Member. For more information on the AGM, contact Niamh O'Reilly, Membership Development Officer on 01 406 8220 or noreilly@aontas.com.



Stephen Stewart, an adult learner with NUI Maynooth, outlines his experience of the BTEA

Policy Watch – The Back to Education Initiative

AONTAS is calling on the government to take immediate action to make major changes to the Back to Education Allowance scheme administered by the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

The BTEA was originally introduced to provide an incentive to people on social welfare payments to improve their skills and qualifications so that they could return to employment. Qualifying for the Back to Education Allowance may also entitle an adult learner to other benefits, such as the top up grant, or rent allowance. People on low incomes are currently not entitled to the scheme. In a written response to a parliamentary question on the issue posed by Ruairi Quinn, Labour Spokesperson for Education, Minister for

Social and Family Affairs, Martin Cullen responded that he was 'satisfied that overall, the current arrangements ensure that the scheme continues to support those people who are more distant from the labour market.'

According to Berni Brady, AONTAS Director, 'the economic climate in Ireland was very different when this incentive was first introduced with much higher unemployment levels. One of the serious issues currently facing the Irish government is the task of upskilling 170,000 members of the workforce. Changes to the BTEA would give these workers, who currently are on low incomes a serious incentive to pursue upskilling and further education.'

Meanwhile in later press release issued by the Department of Social and Family Affairs on Minister Cullen stated that 'a key challenge is to maximise the number

who are in employment and to continually improve the quality of the jobs that they have.' Ms Brady remarked 'Surely the way to ensure that people have better quality jobs is to help them access education. Instead of getting caught up with bureaucracy, the government must take immediate steps to ensure that low paid, low skilled workers are eligible for the scheme. With these sorts of anomalies, is it any wonder that our record of upskilling as adults is so poor in comparison with other countries.' Stephen Stewart, an adult learner has been lobbying for changes in the criteria for the BTEA. This system is a disincentive to work, he said, 'It penalises those on low pay.'

To download a copy of Stephen's research on the BTEA, go to the 'Useful Resources' section on the AONTAS website. To keep an eye on policy developments in the sector, go to the policy news section of the AONTAS website.

New Student Support Bill

In February Minister for Education Mary Hanafin brought a new Student Support Bill before the Dáil. But what implications does the Bill have for adult learners? AONTAS particularly supports the move to streamline the administrative procedures for the management of the student grant awarding process. AONTAS believes this move will be of great benefit to all adult learners engaging in further and higher education.

By simplifying the range of different grants and awarding authorities which students must currently negotiate in order to apply for a grant, information will be more accessible and the whole process of obtaining funding will be much simpler. Although there are several financial assistance schemes available in Ireland to help learners to progress through further and higher education the application process for each of the grants can be very challenging. Adult learners not only have to

pick a course, they also have to check that their chosen course and college is approved for a maintenance grant by finding out what scheme applies to their chosen course. On top of all this they then have the added task of finding out where they should submit their grant application.

In 2007 AONTAS received 3,485 queries from adult learners looking for advice and support. A massive 24% of these queries were from learners looking for information and clarity on how to access funding. Jennifer Gunning, Information Officer in AONTAS, said *"This signifies that there is a need to make the current information available more comprehensible. Currently learners, who are pursuing a Degree or a Post-Graduate course, have to apply to their local authority, whereas if they are a Trainee, pursuing a Post Leaving Cert (PLCs), Cert or Diploma, they should apply to their Vocational Education Committee (VEC). Therefore finding the administrator of a particular grant just adds to the task list and obstacles that face adult learners."*

Bréifne U3A to Open

The University of the Third Age (U3A) is an international movement which promotes educational and social activities intended to make retirement a rich and fulfilling time, when people can do things they had always wanted to but for which they had never had the time or the opportunity.

U3A is for people from all walks of life and all abilities and is based on the principle that *'everyone has something to learn, everyone has something to teach'*. The movement was founded in France in 1972 and U3A is now a worldwide organisation. In Ireland it operates under the umbrella of Age Action Ireland.

Each U3A has *'interest groups'*, which may be people wanting to pursue a particular activity or study, be it local history, classic cars, science in everyday life, television watching, books,

horse racing, architecture, archaeology, confidence-building, conversation in a foreign language, walks (town or country, short, long or just ambling), or anything else.

There are many U3A's in the Dublin area and now one is to be founded to serve Bréifne, an area which includes Leitrim, Roscommon, and Sligo.

Some interest groups will be run by a facilitator, who will guide the group, others will involve collaborative learning. Groups will generally meet in the afternoon, some in Boyle, others wherever is convenient in the Bréifne area.

U3A is a cooperative organisation and welcomes links with existing groups and organisations. If you are interested, please telephone the Director-Designate, Dr Martin G. Spillane, (071) 964 7843 or preferably email breifneu3a@msn.com

New Interdepartmental Committee established to oversee National Skills Strategy

In February 2008 Minister for Lifelong Learning Seán Haughey announced the establishment of a new Committee to implement the National Skills Strategy. The Committee will be appointed by the end of March and will put together a plan and begin to implement it by the end of the summer.

This is a significant development in that the work of the Committee will link two departments – the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment. The Committee faces a considerable challenge – the upskilling of 500,000 people by 2020. Speaking about

the appointment, the Minister said, *'the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs has examined the potential of a number of innovative measures to incentivise both employers and employees to more fully engage in education and training. These findings will be available shortly and it is likely that they will form part of the overall plan.'*

Berni Brady, Director of AONTAS responded positively to the appointment. *'We particularly welcome the inter-departmental approach of the Committee which recognises the link between education and training'*, she commented. *'We are delighted to hear the Minister's plan to make it easier for people to participate in education and training through a number of incentives to both employers and employees. These include a more flexible approach to training and education. It is our experience however that the major*

obstacle facing people wishing to return to learning is finance. The reality is that many members of the workforce would like to participate in further education but are instead forced to negotiate their way through nothing short of an obstacle course in order to gain a qualification.'

The Committee will, for the first time, bring together all the key agencies responsible for adult learning and training and enable it to develop an integrated implementation plan for the upskilling of the workforce. This year alone, the Government plans to invest €77 million in the provision of training programmes to those in employment. The Minister was also keen to point out that the Committee will have a *'strong hands on role'* in addressing the skills needs of Ireland's workforce.

For further updates visit the policy news section of our website.

News from Europe



Gina Ebner and Marta Lottes from the EAEA with Berni Brady and Minister of State Seán Haughey

Active European Citizenship Group established

The European Director General of Education and Culture has decided to structure the dialogue with NGOs participating in the Europe for Citizens program. In order to do so, they have initiated an Active European Citizenship Group, which met for the second time on Monday 4 February 2008. The group's main goal is to address how to encourage the participation of European citizens in the EU project and activities.

The objectives of the group are the following:

- Create a network at EU level in the area of active citizenship;
- Set up a place for regular exchange and debate between the European Commission and civil society organizations working in the area of active citizenship;
- Provide a tool to take stock of experience, good practices and share results from participants' activities;
- Contribute to the preparation and implementation of the Europe for Citizens Annual Forum; Reinforce coherence and efficiency of all initiatives in this area;
- The agendas of the meetings are to be decided jointly by the European Commission and participants. The group will meet twice or three times a year. In the 4th of February meeting it was agreed that two focus groups will be created;
- One to work on the notion of active citizenship itself, as it was felt that a clarification of the concept was necessary. Another one will work on the Annual Forum 2008, due to take place in November 2008 (Social Platform weekly update).

For more information visit the EAEA website, www.eaea.org

New European Study on Gender and Lifelong Learning available online

The study, entitled 'Gender Aspects in Lifelong Learning' was commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education, and aimed to gather data relating to the participation of women in lifelong learning around Europe and to make recommendations on increasing the number of women in lifelong learning. The study also looks at lifelong learning in the context of increased access to or promotion within the labour market. The study is based within the context of the adult and community education sector.

The study pulls together research from six countries – Germany, Greece, Poland, Spain, the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, as well as snapshots from the Nordic countries explaining how specific issues such as childcare have been addressed. An additional chapter looks specifically at the issue of women in business. AONTAS provided information on the Irish research context.

The research highlights all sorts of interesting findings about women and their participation in lifelong learning.

For example, did you know...:

- About 70% of participants in adult education are women.
- Although the participation rate of women in lifelong learning is higher, and their educational achievements exceed males, this is not reflected in the employment rate. Female employment in Europe currently stands at 55.7%.
- Work related to 'male characteristics' such as ICT and technology, brings higher rewards to income and social status, as opposed to that related to female characteristics, such as the health, care and education sectors.
- The European Social Fund has contributed towards women's education and training, and consequently to their employment.
- In Nordic countries, paid parental leave and comprehensive childcare contribute to participation in education and training and promotion in employment.

To download a copy of the study, visit:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/committees/studies/download.do?file=18651>

Time for a Leap of Faith

In the wake of the Adult Learners' Festival, Berni Brady considers the message of the Festival, and the wider importance of a culture of lifelong learning in Ireland.



Berni Brady, AONTAS Director, presents Minister for Lifelong Learning Seán Haughey with a petition from 1,500 adult learners

This year's Adult Learners' Festival has been a resounding success in that it has profiled a range of activities across the country which indicate the interest in and hunger for learning opportunities amongst the Irish population.

The theme of the Festival this year 'Learning Matters' was chosen to deliver the message that learning is an inherent part of the human spirit and that it matters to us right through our lives in our individual development, in our work, in our social and family settings and in how we contribute to making the world a better place to live in and preserve it for future generations. The current life expectancy for an Irish adult is approximately 80 years of age. If we calculate that formal education ends at approximately 18 years of age, this means that three quarters of our lifetime is spent away from formal education. The notion that learning finishes when

formal education ends need to be firmly dispelled and the concept of lifelong learning needs to be firmly embedded in the thinking, the policies, the strategies and resources for the development and expansion of learning opportunities for people at every stage of life.

Progress and Priorities

At the closing event of its first Adult Learning Festival AONTAS launched its **Demand Your Right to Learn Campaign** identifying ten key priorities for the development of the adult and community education sector. The priorities centred on Funding, Structures and Supports. It is just ten years since any significant funding was allocated to the development of this sector, and the Department of Education and Science will rightly state that funding to the sector has doubled in the past three years. I have heard similar statements on equality policy

on promotions of women in the higher education sector, such as the numbers of women professorships increasing by 50%. That meant instead of one woman they now had two! We cannot ignore the fact that up until ten years ago there was practically no funding for our work and the service relied almost entirely on volunteers.

Funding now stands at just over 2% of the total education budget – an increase from 0.01% in 1996. Yes we have made a great deal of progress. Programmes have been funded under the National

"Learning is an inherent part of the human spirit and it matters to us throughout our lives."



The Parents Education Programme in Wicklow, winners of the Leinster Local STAR award

Development Plans; the adult education service now has many more paid staff; numbers accessing services have increased; it is now possible to have make a career in the adult education sector; but there are still many inequities and barriers in the system.

Adult learners' progression routes are often stymied by lack of information and guidance, lack of finance, childcare and other study supports. AONTAS is full of case study stories of the bravery, courage and persistence of adult learners as if they are completing an obstacle course just because they want to better themselves. I am questioning why this should be, why we, the National Adult Learning Organisation are constantly profiling peoples' learning journeys in an effort to convince those responsible for the delivery of the public service that is education, and that we the taxpayers fund, that they are worth investing in. Why can't taking up learning opportunities be the norm as is the case in many of the Northern European countries where learning throughout life is a normal expectation of everyday life?

In its Budget submission last year AONTAS focused on four out of our ten priorities.

These were:-

- Parity of esteem for part-time learners in higher education with regard to fees;

- The inclusion of low paid workers in the Back to Education Allowance scheme;
- Investment in the Adult education Guidance Initiative;
- Review and increase in childcare support for all adult education and training programmes.

Part Time Fees

The issue of third level fees has been a bone of contention for adult learners ever since the fees waiver for full time courses was introduced in 1996. It is the greatest barrier to access for adult learners. This has been recognised by numerous reports and employers. In our pre-election discussions all parties made commitments to addressing it. The current government has written it into Towards 2016.

The Taoiseach addressing the ICTU conference in June last year stated *'I am also pleased to announce today that a new scheme will commence in Autumn, aimed at alleviating the fees in public institutions for part-time courses for those at work who have not previously pursued a third qualification.'* He continued, *'The scheme is currently being finalized by the Department of Education and Science and the Higher Education Authority. It will provide recognition of prior experience and students will be able to accumulate modular credits. There will be flexible*

"The notion that learning finishes when formal education ends needs to be firmly dispelled."

delivery, flexible attendance times and flexible learning support and courses will lead to awards at levels 6 and 7 in the National Framework of Qualifications'. Which Autumn does he refer to, and what scheme?

The Adult Education Guidance Initiative has been one of the most successful programmes developed as a pilot under the National Development Plan 2000-2007 and is now mainstreamed in all VECs. Its reviews have proven its effectiveness yet only €2million was allocated to its expansion this year, only enough to support half of the services who wanted to expand. As to the childcare issue; this is continues to be a barrier for adult learners, especially for women and lone parents. One would be challenged to find childcare for €63.50 per week which is the current rate of support unchanged since it was first implemented in 1998. AONTAS called for a modest doubling of this with annual reviews.

Making Learning Matter

In the mid sixties a Minister for Education with a vision took a risk and opened up free education at post primary level to the Irish people. His leap of faith transformed Irish society and built the foundations for economic prosperity we have today by investing in people, I would contend that another leap of faith needs to be made today, to expand and resource learning, not as a boxed in systematized activity confined to institutions but reaching out into the school of life, the wider environment in which people live out their lives and make sense of their world.

Berni Brady,
Director AONTAS

Views from Around the Country

This year's festival saw over one hundred events taking place around the country. Local Links around the country helped to promote the festival and raise awareness about the value of adult and community education. Here is a snapshot of how some of the events went in their own words.



Learning about learning: Open Day on the Beara Peninsula

More Again Next Year Please

Project Co-ordinator of The Haven Family Resource Centre, Castletownbere, AONTAS local link and Executive Committee Member.

This year's Adult Learners' Festival was built around the principle that the event itself was a learning opportunity. The focus was not just on courses and qualifications but also on the supports that adult learners might need to participate and opportunities available locally. With this agenda in mind, The Haven Family Resource Centre, Castletownbere set about building on last year's inaugural event.

Universities, colleges and schools offering outreach or distance learning courses from Dublin, Cork and Galway were represented, together with local agencies such as Bord Iascaigh Mhara and the VEC. Beara Camera Club and Beara Toastmasters were examples of community based learning that took part.

Citizen's Information, Cork County Library services, Money Advice and Budgeting (MABS) and the Department of Social Welfare were on hand to provide information and advice.

Rehab Care, Irish Wheelchair Association and WorkStart West Cork promoted the services and supports that they provide for people with disabilities.

The successes to date have been both major and on a personal level. Demand for one course was such that the university offering the course is confident that it can locate and deliver it in Castletownbere. Another wants to discuss options for the future and a third is willing to alternate the location of the modules to facilitate Beara adult learners.

One resident wasn't aware of the services provided by the Irish Wheelchair Association and has since been able to take her mother out using their bus. Local employers responded to the services provided by WorkStart West Cork by registering their interest in supporting people back into the workplace.

One learner who was featured in one of the photographs in last year's AONTAS magazine, is proudly standing by the display of photographs from a Digital Photography course funded by Co. Cork VEC. This year Sue Money was hosting a stand on behalf of Beara Camera Club, (of which she is now Secretary), and taking 'official' photos of the event. She has already been commissioned for some work and is registered as a tutor with the local VEC. Sue is currently working on a community project teaching digital camera skills to national school children. She is building her portfolio towards a career in photography.

The feedback was 'more again next year please' and a suggestion that educational suppliers are included on the invitation list. This may mean that adult learners of Beara will be needing supplies in the coming year!



Gillian Harrison, Co-ordinator and Steve Harrington, Manager of the Haven Centre

Promoting Learning in Kildare

Writes Theresa Doyle, Service Development Manager with the Sisters of Charity Of Jesus and Mary

In Kildare, the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary held an Adult Learning Fair on Wednesday 6th. The organisation already provides services to individuals with an intellectual disability in the South Kildare area, and they support and provide opportunities to individuals for adult learning. They were recently awarded a quality assurance agreement from FETAC.

The organisation wanted to achieve a number of aims through the festival – to promote adult learning opportunities in the area, to showcase the achievements of adult learners and allow them to share their experience, to create awareness of what is possible, and to share information about opportunities for people to get involved in adult learning as learners or even as tutors.



Angela and Bernie from Kildare VEC at their Information Stand in Newbridge

The Fair featured displays, talks from learners and tutors, exhibitions of course work, portfolios and photography. People interested in learning, as well as representatives of the local VEC and Kildare Community Education Service were in attendance on the day. A spokesperson from the group explained, 'Getting involved in this year's Adult Learners' Festival, from the perspective of the people we support in our services, gives us an opportunity to showcase the work they and we all do in providing, supporting and working collaboratively with people in lifelong learning. This event was a means of information sharing within the service for everyone to learn and appreciate more about what is on offer to the people we support in our services, it may encourage more people to be involved in adult learning as learners, tutors and supporters'.



Ladies with Woodcraft and Wallhangings

Raising Awareness in Newbridge

Writes Angela Doherty of the Adult Education Guidance Service

Balloons, banter and brochures galore were the order of the day on Thursday, February 7th when staff of Co. Kildare VEC's Adult Education Guidance Service took to the Dunnes Stores Shopping Mall, Moorefield, Newbridge with their information stand, to celebrate AONTAS Adult Learners Festival.

Positioned opposite the main entrance to Dunnes Stores, the stand was in a perfect spot to catch the attention of the thousands of shoppers who use the mall daily. "Business" was brisk all day long with enquiries being answered, brochures and contact numbers supplied and appointments for further guidance or advice made with staff at the service's usual home in Georges Street, Newbridge. As usual the management and staff of the mall were courteous and obliging and the day was a huge success both in promoting the many local VEC programmes available and in raising awareness of the Guidance Service.



Jolanta Kowalska, Carmen Quilez, Maria Goldar and ESOL Tutor Resource Worker in Laois Sandra Doyle

Education... One of the Greatest Tools we've Got!

Writes Mary Connell, of the Adult Education Guidance Service in Laois

Co. Laois VEC held a one night exhibition of adult learning through Art in the Parish Centre, Portlaoise on Tuesday 5th of February. The work displayed represented learning from the variety of art, craft and design courses offered by Co. Laois VEC's Adult Education service. A wonderful variety of Art work was showcased by adult learners and their tutors. The selection included pieces of pyrography, acrylic painting, Fashion design, woodcarving, ceramics and upholstery. On the night some intrepid learners gave a display of artistic techniques including pyrography, needlework and sketching.

The Art on display represented the exceptional work taking place in the VEC's Adult Education Services including, St Canices Traveller Training Centre, Abbeyleix Further Education Centre, Youthreach, The Adult Learning Centre, Portlarrington Adult Education Centre and Community Education Services. Each stand had something different to offer and the quality of the work was of the highest standard. All those involved in its creation are to be highly commended for their application, vision and dedication.

Speaking about the event Laois VEC Chairperson Rev Nancy Gillespie said *'The Adult Learning through Art Exhibition demonstrates in a very colourful and vibrant way what is available to adults considering returning to learning in Co. Laois. Adult education is tailored to meet the needs of the learner.'*

The evening was a great success with over one hundred people enjoying the festive atmosphere which was enhanced by the learners from the VEC's ESOL programme contributing dishes from Eastern Europe.

Local Media Promotes Adult Learning

Writes Jane Stenson, Information Officer with Leitrim Adult Guidance Service

To mark the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival, Leitrim Adult Education Guidance Service of Leitrim VEC ran two Information Evenings, in Carrick-on-Shannon and Manorhamilton, covering both the north and south of the county. We provided information on education, training and supports available in the region. We also celebrated adult learning by showcasing some of the excellent work created by our students.

We submitted an article to the local paper highlighting the journey taken by four local people who returned to education. It outlined the different ways people can access education and the impact returning to education had on their lives.

Niamh Brennan our Adult Education Guidance Co-ordinator did a radio interview with Shannon Side Northern Sound highlighting the events taking place for the AONTAS Festival and the opportunities available for adults who wish to return to education.

Education Through Art in Co. Wexford

Writes Fran Kennedy of Co. Wexford VEC

Four Community Arts Groups from around Co. Wexford exhibited their work at The Waterfront Gallery, Paul Quay Wexford. The groups; Coolgreany Community Arts, The Faythe Active in Community Education, Good Friends Group New Ross and Kilmuckridge Pixel Group are all funded under the Community Education Programme of Co. Wexford VEC. They all use the Arts as a way of engaging people in the community and bringing people together.

The exhibition was opened on Sunday 3rd February 2008 by Jim Maguire, local poet and community arts practitioner. On Tuesday 5th February 2008 all of the group gave a presentation of their work. This was attended by over 50 people. On Thursday 7th and Friday 8th the groups gave workshops in clay modeling and painting. Again over 100 people attended. Over the course of the week over 500 people visited the exhibition thus creating a lot of interest and awareness of adult education opportunities.



Mayor of South Dublin Billy Gogarty launches the Adult Learners' Fair in Tallaght

The evaluation of the exhibition highlighted that people now had a confidence in their work and that it was valued. It gave people renewed energy for their group and getting others active and involved. In all it was very successful and fulfilling.

Something for everyone at the Tallaght Adult Learners' Fair

Writes Ian Stobbert of South Dublin County Libraries

The Tallaght Adult Learners' Fair took place in the newly extended County Library in Tallaght Town Centre and was organised by TALENT (Tallaght Adult Learning NeTwork). There were 28 stands taken by a wide range of exhibitors from the Tallaght area. Among the events were talks given on education opportunities, a capacitor demonstration, storytime for the children present, face painting and fun science demonstrations. There was a "tree of learning" where you could have your experiences in education written down and hung on the tree. Visitors were also encouraged to "sew a patch" on a large quilt for the Adult Learners' Festival.

The fair was opened at 11.00am by Billy Gogarty, the Mayor of South Dublin. When the fair closed at 7.00pm it was estimated that around 700 people had attended throughout the day.



St Basils Education Stand

spoke about the worthwhile work done by them and one of the TARGET staff, Nora Mulligan, recited a poem of her own about "The clock in Raheny". It was a great window to the outside and great credit is due to NEAR FM for helping to us to get this exposure.

There was free tea and coffee available and TARGET, which had been decorated with balloons, bunting, and beautiful flowers, was graced by many visitors from different spectrums of the community. There was a great buzz among the staff and students who were all listening in to radios when they got a chance, to the various contributions of their colleagues. AONTAS are to be commended also for giving us the opportunity to promote our classes in an enjoyable way and the result was plenty of phone enquiries with potential enrolments for our forthcoming classes. Overall it was a worthwhile event for everyone concerned and we look forward to more of the same in the future.

Promoting Learning at the Mill

Writes Bernadette Beatley of Rowlagh Womens Group

Rowlagh Women's Group as part of the Adult Learners' Festival distributed information leaflets about ourselves and AONTAS in the Mill centre Clondalkin. People showed great interest in both Rowlagh Women's Group and AONTAS when we spoke to them and we had a great response from both men and women either by speaking to them personally or by phone calls we received from women wanting to enrol on our courses.

Rowlagh Women's Group estimates that they distributed some 1,200 leaflets over a period of a couple of hours. The group organise courses in DIY, Health, Art, Computers and physical education, and received a 'Highly Commended' award at the STAR Awards Ceremony.



IICP Stand at Tallaght Adult Learners' Fair

Learning on Air

Writes Nora Mulligan of TARGET education in Donaghmede

Open Day in TARGET was on Wednesday 6th February 2008 from 9.30am until 12.30pm. NEAR FM, the local radio station set up their outside broadcasting unit in TARGET the previous day. Gerry McNamee, the Manager of TARGET, got the ball rolling on the day with the introduction followed by Brenda Kellett, the TARGET Adult Literacy co-ordinator. The Special Needs group had a ball talking on the radio and a few of the classes which were on that day were also featured. The Home Furnishing tutor spoke about her class, one of the crèche staff



Members of Dun Laoghaire Active Retirement Association

Creative writing on the Southside

Writes Barbara Hammond, Local Link in Dun Laoghaire

Foxrock and Dun Laoghaire active retirement groups got together during the Adult Learners’ Festival week and held a public reading of the work they had written in their creative writing class during the past year. This was the first time that the groups had come together for such an event. Members from the neighbouring Cabinteely association also came along as they too are interested in getting together to write. *‘There’s great enjoyment in reading, listening and learning and it all comes from within the groups’* said Mary Cassoni one of the readers and organisers of the event. Another one of the members has published a booklet with the stories and photos as a memento of the event and a way of letting others see what can be achieved.

A Musical Experience to Celebrate Learning

Writes Marian McRory M.Ed. B.A. H.Dip in Educ, L.T.C.L., L.L.C.M. (Lecturer in the Philosophy of Music Education on the B.Mus Degree Course tutor for Adult Musicianship)

Ever wondered what it would be like to learn music as an adult?

Many people reach adulthood regretting the fact that they never learned music or how to play an instrument. Music learning is synonymous with childhood in most people’s minds. ‘I’m too old now’; ‘I’m not talented’; ‘My family are not musical’; are the typical responses. Yet music is part of everybody’s life whether they enjoy classical, jazz, pop or rock. It touches every person’s soul.

But can it be part of their education? “Absolutely” is the answer. In the course of my teaching and lecturing I have

witnessed adults achieve real success in music. I wanted people to see that music education is accessible for the adult learner, while also being enjoyable and life enhancing. It is valuable knowledge that will enrich the learner’s future long after they have ceased their musical studies.

To put action to words, and to let people get a feel for these courses, the DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama agreed to offer an open class, as part of the 2008 Adult Learners’ Festival. It would give participants an opportunity to experience music teaching and learning in a specialist college.

Adult musicianship classes are all about experiencing music through singing, rhythm, and listening. The approach is the same as teaching children. In my experience adults don’t want some sort of compensatory music education. They want the real thing. The objective of this class was to give them a sample of just that.

Of course some knowledge of composers enhances the listening. Participants listened to musical works by some of the great composers including Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Debussy and Stravinsky. The listening, in turn, gave them an overview of musical styles ranging from Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Impressionist and Modern. As the music was being played students were being directed on how to listen.

What was really heartening was to see all these possible “would-be adult music students” mingle with current adult students who were more than willing to share their experiences over a glass of wine at the reception afterwards. Two other teachers Anita Hopper and Claire Flynn were on hand to answer any questions regarding music courses at DIT. While all this chatting was going on an Adult Cello Group (tutor Arun Rao) played a selection of pieces from Handel’s Water Music, which enhanced the atmosphere of the evening.

Combining these three musical encounters – the experience of the music class, socialising with other adult music students and listening adult musicians playing chamber music – I sincerely hope that the event gave each participant a truly musical experience.



Information Stand in Edenderry



Celebrating Learning in Tipperary

Recognising Achievements in Edenderry

Writes Karina Curley, Local Link in North Offaly

Three events were organised in North Offaly during Adult Learners' Festival to celebrate and promote adult learning in the area.

Migrant workers attending English classes in Edenderry were offered the opportunity to meet with Catherine Gavigan, Offaly VEC Guidance Counsellor, to explore further progression opportunities and learn how they can gain recognition for qualifications previously acquired in their home country.

24 participants from the Foundations for Employment Programme in Rhode, Co Offaly and the Computer and Office Skills Programme in Rathangan, Co. Kildare, were presented with Certificates at an event in Rhode Enterprise Centre. Martin Quilty, representing FETAC on the day, spoke to programme participants, pointing out that *"this presentation is one way of recognising what you have achieved and it is also showing you a pathway to further achievements"*. A number of participants shared their positive experience of returning to learning.

The Downshire Shopping Centre in Edenderry was the focus of a day-long promotion and information event on Friday 8th February. Staff from OAK Partnership, Offaly VEC and FÁS were on hand with information on every aspect of learning, including Literacy and Numeracy, Basic Education, evening classes, a range of specific Skills Training programmes, courses for Women Returning to the Workforce, Career Planning and Job Seeking.



Members of TARGET in Donaghmede

Overall the week was a wonderful success, due in no small way to the momentum and support received from AONTAS and the link to the Adult Learners' Festival. There is a sense that as the concept of Adult Learners' Festival gains recognition and identity as an annual event, support and enthusiasm at a local level will continue to grow.



South County Libraries stand at the Tallaght Adult Learners' Fair

Celebrating Learning in Co. Westmeath

Writes Nuala O'Brien, Community Education Facilitator in Westmeath

Castledaly Community Centre hosted a celebratory evening on Monday 4th February as part of the National Adult Learners' Festival. 25 women from community education groups in the county joined the host group, St. Ciaran's Ladies Club, for an evening of chat, singing, poetry and drama, followed by supper. The guest speakers at the event were Maureen Kavanagh from AONTAS and Rina McKenna, Adult Education Officer with Westmeath VEC both of whom outlined the benefits of involvement in adult learning.

Bridie Ledwith, Chairperson of St. Ciaran's Ladies Club, got the evening off to a great start with her words of welcome for women who had travelled from Ballinahown, Moate, Athlone, Mullingar, Collinstown, Kilbeggan, Kinnegad and Brussels! Special guests at the event were Gina Ebner and Marta Lottes from the European Association of Adult Education which is a network of national adult education organisations in Europe. They were able to get first-hand accounts of adult learning in Westmeath and even managed to win something in the raffle!

Everyone thoroughly enjoyed the evening and by the end of the night plans were afoot for a follow-up workshop in the Autumn.

A Day to Remember in Tipperary

Writes Veronica Crowe from Tipperary VEC

Over 230 learners attended South Tipperary VEC Adult Learners' Festival on Friday 8th February. This event was co-ordinated by Veronica Crowe Community Education facilitator. The VEC, The Mall, Clonmel was a hive of activity when the festival kicked off at 10.30 am. The morning session included personal insights from both an adult learners' perspective and also a tutors'. This gave the audience a wonderful view of what it was like to return to adult education and how it improves personal development, assertiveness and skills. Many thanks to Teresa McGarry, Margaret Quirke, Yemi Erinle, Geraldine



The Downtown Centre in Limerick

Hennessy and Regina Power for taking the time to put your pen to paper it was a pleasure to listen to.

The highlight of the day, which brought much laughter to the room, was the fantastic staged drama production co-ordinated by Will Nugent and included learners from various womens' groups all over South Tipperary, Rehab Care Clonmel, Moorehaven Centre Tipp Town and Knockanrawley Resource Centre. There were definitely some stars to be seen here in the making when we got a snap shot of Father Ted, Fair City and Musical Bands. Not only was this performance tops it was then followed by our fabulous set dancers from the Clonmel Women's Group who gave an excellent performance thanks to the guidance and expertise of Chris Eichbaum. They danced and moved with excellence giving a wonderful display, well done girls. Throughout the morning the VEC Adult Education Service displayed information stands to give support and advice in areas such as BTEI, Community Education, Adult Literacy, Adult Guidance, Youthreach, VTOS, Post Leaving Cert, Central Technical Institute, Arts Centre, Clonmel Library, and Men's Development Network.

All in all, the day was a huge success and the numbers who attended exceeded our expectations. We are thankful to everyone who helped on the day and supported us in any way. But most of all, thank you, the adult learners for taking the time to join us in our celebration and making it a day to remember. So, from all in the Adult Education Section of South Tipperary VEC, Thanks.



Limerick BTEI group with Tutor Mairead Ryan

Learning in Limerick

Writes Local Link Rhona Sharry

The Downtown Centre participated in the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival for the first time this year and did so by highlighting the value of adult learning through the airwaves. Two of its students, Helen Brooks and Gerard Baker, who are currently studying the Humanities elective on the Certificate in General Studies, spoke on the Morning Focus programme on Clare FM about their experiences of returning to full-time education and the confidence it has given them to consider pursuing higher education programmes next year. Two other students, Michael Quirke and Tanya McNamara, who are studying Humanities and Science respectively, also spoke to their peers on Wired FM, Limerick's student campus radio about their decisions to return to full-time education. According to Michael 'it can be a difficult decision, particularly from a financial point of view when you have to give up full-time employment, but it is manageable with some forward planning.'

The Downtown Centre also launched its new website (www.downtowncentre.ie), in a celebration with its students, on 6th February. The website highlights the services provided by the Centre, in particular its Educational Guidance Service, which offers information and advice to anyone over the age of 18 who is considering undertaking a higher education programme, and the Certificate in General Studies, a 24-week FETAC certificate which guarantees direct entry to a range of undergraduate programmes in the University of Limerick, Limerick Institute of Technology, Mary Immaculate College and the Institute of Technology Tralee. The students were particularly impressed with the specially commissioned cake for the occasion – despite the launch being held on Ash Wednesday, there were very few refusals for a piece of cake and a cup of tea!

The University of Limerick held its Mature Students Open Evening on 5th February and the Downtown Centre joined colleagues from different academic and support departments in the University in providing information and advice to mature applicants to higher education. There was a great buzz in the Foundation Building in UL that evening, with large numbers of interested learners wandering around and meeting University and Downtown Centre staff. An interest in learning is alive and well in Limerick!

Learning Over Coffee

Writes Suzanne Rowley, Information and Communications Officer with West Limerick Resources

Participants from a number of local adult education initiatives including the FÁS Local Training Initiative (LTI) in Dromcollogher, the Brothers of Charity, the VEC's Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) in Newcastle West and West Limerick Resources FILAT project (which aims to develop useful skills of men and enhance their employment potential), attended the coffee morning with their respective tutors. 'This was a valuable networking opportunity for both the course providers and the participants and highlighted the extent of activity in the adult education sector in this area,' says Ms. Julie White, Co. Limerick VEC Community Education Development Worker. 'We were very happy with both the turn out for the event and the feedback which we received.'

Adult education takes many forms, from formal class-based learning to self-directed learning both in formal educational institutes and within the community. In West Limerick organisations such as the VEC and FÁS, with the assistance of West Limerick Resources, administer courses which are designed to allow adult learners and early school leavers return to education in flexible ways that take account of their particular needs and circumstances as an adult. Participants are afforded the opportunity to update their skills and to combine this education with their family, caring or other responsibilities.

Extension to Co. Cavan VEC Adult Education Service Launched

Writes Gemma Brady, Local Link in Cavan

Monday February 4th 2008 marked the beginning of a new era in adult education.

Co Cavan VEC welcomed a large gathering of invited guests, including Minister for Children Brendan Smith who led the ribbon cutting ceremony of the Extension to The Adult Education Service, the VEC's new training and education facility. The range of lifelong learning programs on offer here includes basic and continued adult education, professional career certifications, and language courses.

Strategically positioned in the centre of Cavan Town the new Adult Education centre consists of two primary floors of technologically advanced training and instructional space.



Left to Right: Mr Colm McEvoy CEO, Ms Madeline Argue Co. Cavan VEC, Minister Brendan Smith, Ms Fiona Maloney AEO, Mr Clifford Kelly Chairman Co. Cavan VEC

The facility boasts state of the art computer and learning environment for adults, staff offices and a career resources centre.

Programs and courses offered are managed by the Adult Education Service which includes Cavan Adult Learning Centre, Community Education and Cavan Adult Guidance and Education Service.

Many of the Adult Education Service day and evening classes are conducted free of charge at this centre and in various sites throughout the county. Fiona Maloney Co. Cavan VEC Adult Education Officer says 'This is a fantastic facility offering a wide range of courses; it is testament to the VEC's commitment to adult education opportunities in the County. Today will give everyone the chance to find out about the huge range of learning opportunities being made available by Co. Cavan VEC at this centre, and across the County.

Promoting Adult Education Across the Divides

Writes Lorraine Cunningham, Local Link in Drogheda

The Drogheda Inter-Community Partnership who have been in existence only two years, so with this in mind it was an overwhelming experience for such a young project to have achieved so much in such a short time. In celebrating with their success was the Lord Mayor of Newtownabbey Nigel Hamilton,

Director of AONTAS Berni Brady, Davd Neil, Vice Chairperson, Lisa Mc Mullen SEUPB, Victor Robinson Director of the Project, Vikki Robinson Northern Co-ordinator, Lorraine Cunningham Southern Co-ordinator, and a large number of the participants who have made this cross border cross community as successful as it is today. The aim of this project is to bring Protestants and Catholics together in their own communities and from both sides of the border to solve problems, to explore each other's communities and groups, linked by history, culture and social environments, working at ground and street level.

The project to date has been facilitation for change, with a more hands on approach by local people and communities, more networking and cooperation, more involvement of isolated communities that have been affected by the conflict, and better communication and coordination, pushing back the borders, building trust, confidence, equality of opportunity and partnership, with a wide group of potential beneficiaries. The ultimate goal is to enable people who would not normally engage in good relations work and cross border reconciliation, to do so with the confidence, enthusiasm and commitment.

Maybe now that we have a shared Executive restored we can learn from all our previous experiences. And hopefully none of the past conflicts will prevent us from coming together as one.



Siobhan McDonagh and Thomas Collins at the Family Portrait session in Avila Park Community Centre.

Family Portrait Session in Avila Park Community Centre

Writes Fergus Craddock, ABLE Co-ordinator with Finglas Cabra Partnership and AONTAS Local Link

As part of the Adult Learners' Festival (February 4th to 8th), a Family Portrait session was organised in Avila Park Community Centre on Tuesday 5th February to give an opportunity to families in the area to get a print of their family and children while looking at the course options that are available in the Finglas and Cabra areas.

The session was very popular with many of the photographs reflecting the characters of the children involved. Photographs were presented to the families in a special evening presentation in the Avila Community Centre on Thursday 21st February.



Cutting the Cake at the Downtown Centre in Limerick



Informing Adult Learners in Leitrim

The Mature Student Experience in Dun Laoghaire

Writes Patricia Byrne, Access Officer with Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology and AONTAS Local Link

As part of AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival a lunchtime seminar hosted by IADT's Centre for Public Culture Studies and Access Office was held in Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology.

Two members of academic staff, Frieda Hand and Michael Murphy, who studied as adults gave a presentation on 'Being a Mature Student'. This was followed by a lively discussion on the 'student experience' which was chaired by IADT Registrar, Dr. Annie Doona. Over thirty people attended including members of IADT's Mature Student Society, academic staff and visitors from the local community.

Over the past few weeks we have been delighted to receive photographs and reports from events around the country – unfortunately due to space constraints we cannot include all of them in this issue. We will upload them onto our festival website www.adultlearnersfestival.com over the coming weeks.

Thanks to everyone who got involved, through acting as local links, organising events, or turning up on the day.

The Adult Learners' Festival 2009 takes place next year from February 2nd to February 6th. If you would like to get involved, give us a call on 01 406 8220.

A Lot Done, More to Do...

At the closing event of the Adult Learners' Festival on February 8th, Berni Brady, AONTAS Director invited the education spokespersons from the various political parties to outline their positions on adult learning. A live audience interacted with the spokespersons, identifying the key questions for the adult education sector. In this article, Niamh Farren summarises some of their responses.



Berni Brady with Fine Gael Spokesperson on Education, Brian Hayes TD

The Background

Cast your mind back to this time last year. Candidates for Election 2007 were hitting the campaign trail, and AONTAS had just launched a high profile pre-election campaign entitled 'Demand your Right to Learn'. The campaign outlined a series of ten demands from the adult and community education sector. Ranging from the general issue of increased resources, to specific financial supports for adult learners and the challenge of co-ordinating structures, the Demands Document captures the needs of the sector.

Fast forward to February 2008. A new report on Lifelong Learning launched at St Patricks College paints a grim picture. 38% of Irish adults over the age of 15 have not completed their secondary education. The numbers of mature adults engaging in further education still lingers at 10% – lower than the OECD average of 20% and well below the Swedish figure of 38%. It would seem that the Knowledge Economy is still a long way off.

So what happened to the ten demands, and the signatures of 1500 people from around the country who felt strongly enough to sign petitions for their implementation? Minor progress has been made, albeit significant. A new Minister for Lifelong Learning has been appointed, with a role that now impacts on two government Departments; the Department of Education and Science, and the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment. Shortly after he was appointed, Seán Haughey announced that the eligibility criteria for the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) would change from 1 September 2007, so that people on low incomes now no longer pay fees to participate in the BTEI.

A new government is in place, and with a number of new faces in education, it was timely to initiate some follow up with the Education Spokespersons. Brian Hayes TD (FG), Paul Gogarty TD (GP) Ruairi Quinn TD (Labour), and Senator Pearse Doherty (SF) all joined Minister for Lifelong Learning Seán Haughey in a panel discussion on the immediate priorities for the adult education sector. Rachael English, veteran political broadcaster from RTÉ took up the role of Ceann Comhairle for the event.



Michael O'Connor, Corporate Communications Manager with Siemens Ireland

The Issues

Berni Brady acknowledged the progress that had been made but highlighted the key issues for the sector, including the issue of part time fees, identified within AONTAS research as the biggest barrier to adult learners. Other issues included the Adult Guidance Initiative which remains drastically underfunded, and the unfair anomaly in the Back to Education Allowance which discriminates unfairly against low paid workers. The childcare allowance for adult learners has not been reviewed since it was first introduced in 1998 – meaning that it now needs to be doubled in order to adequately reflect the cost of childcare today.

Food for Thought

Two interesting presentations gave the panel food for thought. Michael O'Connor is Corporate Communications Manager with Siemens Ireland, and is himself an adult learner. Michael had some personal ideas about how to improve the takeup of adult learning initiatives, such as running courses over the calendar rather than academic year.

He also illustrated the importance of learning in economic terms. In Siemens, some 75% of the products are less than 5 years old, meaning that 75% of their sales in 5 years time haven't been invented yet. As Michael remarked 'That's a huge pressure and clearly highly qualified and motivated people are need to drive this. For this reason we are intensely committed to continuing education.' In Siemens, employees can avail of the 'People Excellence' Programme which provides opportunities for a range of learning options, vocational training, and a number of grant and scholarship initiatives are also in place.

Michael pointed out how multi-national companies are continually relocating to countries with lower production costs, which will result in Ireland becoming continually more dependent on the small to medium enterprise sector. He explained how the Plato programme backed by County Enterprise Boards is an example of an initiative which brings together owner managers from SMEs in a peer based learning approach, thus developing their skills. Michael believes that our poor record of engaging with lifelong learning is seriously limiting our economic potential. 'Our workforce will need constant upskilling to maintain our productivity in globalised markets', he concluded.

From the Personal to the Political

Stephen Stewart left school at the age of 16 with his Intercert. At 39, he decided to go back to full time education and is in his final year of a media degree at NUI Maynooth. Stephen experienced the contradictions inherent in Irish system – as a low paid worker he was disappointed to find that he didn't qualify for the Back to Education Allowance, but was even more puzzled to discover that he could not avail of the Top Up Grant. As a result, when he graduates Stephen will have to deal with the huge financial pressure of paying back money he borrowed to pay his bills while he went back to study full time. Stephen's experience makes a strong case for better co-ordination between the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Social Family Affairs so that the criteria for BTEA is expanded to include low paid workers.



Paul Gogarty TD, Green Party Spokesperson on Education



Rachael English chairing the panel

Questions and Answers

A live audience of learners and practitioners was then invited to ask questions of the panel. Here are some of the questions and the responses they prompted.

Question 1: Una Buckley (Adult Learner)

Flexible learning options are essential for adults, particularly for women, so most adult learners pursuing higher education do so through part-time and distance education modes where they have to pay full fees. The current system discriminates against adult learners. The Social Partnership Agreement, Towards 2016 names lifelong learning as an underpinning principle yet no action has been taken on the fees issue. What is the panel's view on abolishing part-time fees for higher education?

Minister for Lifelong Learning Seán Haughey acknowledged that this was a serious issue for the sector, and that 'the commitment was there' in the Social Partnership Agreement 'Towards 2016', and that 'some progress has been made' but stressed that these decisions did not just rest within his department, but were dependent on estimates and negotiations processes.

Ruairi Quinn said that the Labour party was in favour of abolishing part time fees, but described the current government as one 'that is engaged in cutbacks'. He could not envisage the government abolishing part time fees in the near future.

According to Paul Gogarty the Green Party was the only party to commit to producing costed proposals in relation to education. Before the election the Greens estimated that education needed a spend of some billion euro to bring Ireland up to OECD level but current spending amounting to 350 million

falls well short of that. 'Do I believe part time fees are going to be abolished? Yes I do. Do I believe this will happen within the next couple of years? Sadly based on the evidence I don't think so', Gogarty concluded. 'Even if it means getting extra money from taxes, we need that money for education', he insisted.

Brian Hayes suggested that the government first needs to honour its own commitments in terms of its programme for government. He pointed out that there is a National Training Fund which contains about €80 million, which could be used to alleviate the costs of part time fees, and called for a shift in focus from training 'for people for employment' to people 'in employment.'

Senator Pearse Doherty also called for a shift in policy direction, and suggested that taxpayers money was ill spent on private education. 'Why should the Irish taxpayer fund private education to the tune of €80million,' he queried, 'who have the choice to go through the public system, when the money could be better spent on adult learners, who essentially have no choice? Taxpayers money needs to go into public services' he concluded. 'The cost of eradicating part time fees over a ten year period amounts to 400 million euro, and what the government are proposing to actually commit amounts to about one fortieth of that.'



Senator Pearse Doherty, Sinn Féin Spokesperson on Education

Question 2: Luke Murtagh (Adult Learner)

A recent ESRI report shows that there have been no changes in the numbers of schoolchildren leaving school early over the past ten years, despite over 600 million being invested in initiatives targeting educational disadvantage. If these initiatives are not successful, then alternatives need to be developed to encourage young people back into learning. Adult and community education are often a stepping stone back into formal education. What will the panel do to ensure that the sector develops and is resourced adequately?



The political panel consider the questions from a live audience

Brian Hayes raised the issue of administrative difficulties often experienced within the sector, through the lack of multi-annual funding. This had implications internally for community education groups, in terms of the human resources needed to apply for and administer these grants. Multiannual funding would allow groups to plan, and would ensure that funding was used to support front-line work.

Minister Haughey acknowledged that there was a need for stronger links across all departments and that a start had been made with his own role linking two government departments. Youthreach initiatives also made a significant impact in terms of targeting those who had ‘fallen through the net’ of the education system.

Pearse Doherty observed that this was a hugely complex issue, and drew on his own experience of Donegal, where a culture of early school leaving was apparent. This culture needs to be tackled by a number of stakeholders (including local businesses) and that there was also a need for positive role models. He suggested more ‘thinking outside of the box’, for example the use of media or technology for adult learning.

Paul Gogarty pointed out that the cost of dealing with educational disadvantage at a later stage was higher than at primary or post primary level. For example, the employment of additional education and welfare officers would lower the number of early school leavers would prove less expensive in the long term.



Ruairi Quinn, Labour Party Spokesperson on Education

Question 3: Brenda Clerkin (TARGET Education)

Even though community education was recognised in the White Paper as being of crucial importance to the personal, social and political development of adults and their communities, it still has no specific funding line. Community Education groups constantly struggle with complicated funding applications for small amounts of short term funding taking up valuable time and resources. Also the lack of joined up thinking between government departments and funding agencies responsible for community education and community development creates real problems for groups. What is the panel’s view on a multi-annual dedicated funding strand for community education?

Minister Haughey pointed out that under the Back to Education Initiative, 10% of places were reserved for community education. He agreed that the issue of joined up



Questions and Answers from the Audience

government was pressing, but that the practicalities of how this might happen needed to be worked out first.

Pearse Doherty said that Sinn Féin would support multi-annual funding, but that the funding package needed to be adequate, not only in terms of the service, but also to attract and keep people employed in the sector.

Brian Hayes proposed that Community Education needed its own 'seamless funding line', but that there was a serious need for research to demonstrate the difference that community education made within the wider community. Minister Haughey responded that AONTAS had been allocated funding (€120,000) from his department to initiate this kind of research.

Paul Gogarty suggested that structures and the timing of funding were the critical issues, and that an enhanced administrative role for the VEC as envisaged in the new Student Support Bill could address these issues.

Question 4: Seán Treacy (Committee Member of City of Limerick VEC)

The events of the events of the Adult Learners' Festival have illustrated the high demand for adult education opportunities and have also demonstrated the huge variety of learning activities taking place all over the country. Yet funding for adult and community education has remained stuck at roughly 2% of the education budget for the past five years. Also adult education providers still rely heavily on volunteers to deliver many of their services. Why does the panel think that adult education is treated as less important than formal education and what does it think should be done to rectify this?

Minister Haughey quoted some statistics – €169 billion was spent on further education last year and this year there will be an additional €3 million available. *'The vision is that further education will be treated on a par with other sectors,'* he said. Although there is some recognition of the benefits of education particularly in relation to the economy, *'we still have a long way to go.'*

Brian Hayes pointed out that the percentage of our national wealth spent on education is the same as it was in 1988 and needed to increase. Where countries such as Finland were spending 7.5% of their GDP on education, Ireland was only spending 4.7%. Education was still viewed purely in terms of primary or post primary education. Possibly a newly created government department encompassing education and training might solve this problem.

Pearse Doherty agreed that what was needed was an incremental increase in funding allocated to the sector. Politicians are motivated by political pressure, he observed, and the adult education sector has not been able to exert this type of pressure sufficiently. This is why the Adult Learners' Festival was such a good idea in terms of highlighting adult education. Paul Gogarty was of a similar opinion in that 'those who shout the loudest do get the biggest share of the cake'.

Berni Brady closed the event by saying that she was heartened by some of the commitments that had been made at the event, but that it was important to stress that adult education was not just 'a remedial piece of education for people who had left the sector early but was about the potential of people from 18 right through to 80.'

The panel was recorded by NEAR 90 fm and is available on a podcast from www.nearfm.ie. You can download a copy of Stephen Stewart's research from the AONTAS website. Keep an eye on the policy news section of our website for further details.

Ask Jenny...

Jenny Gunning from AONTAS Information Referral Service answers your adult education queries.

Hi Jenny,
I would like to change career direction - I currently work as a customer service representative and would like to do an evening course in massage - aromatherapy/holistic - I don't mind exactly what area of massage. I am based outside Dublin. Do you know of any courses being offered in the South East?

Thank you in advance,
Elaine.

Hi Elaine,

I would suggest that you contact the Adult Education Officer in your local VEC /College of Further Education to see if they are running this course in your county; as they very often run such courses. This would allow you to gain a qualification whilst developing your interest. The VEC's fees will be substantially cheaper than that of a private college so keep this in mind when choosing the course that suits you. If that fails, see if there is a healing centre within striking distance which might be running training. Also have a look through www.complementarytherapists.org and find someone in your area who may be able to tell you where to receive training near you.

Good Luck,
Jenny.

Hi Jenny,
I'm thinking about doing a distance education degree course but have heard various stories about courses being advertised and not accredited by the approved bodies. Can you offer any advice on what I should be keeping in mind before embarking on one of the distance education degree courses? Also are these courses expensive and if so can I get a grant?

Please help,
Alex.

Hi Alex,

I understand your concerns and yes there are many frauds out there. Distance learning can be a convenient way to upgrade skills and is becoming a growing trend in Ireland. The main thing for students to do is research research research! Going back to study is a commitment and often an expensive one. Know what's on offer, who the accrediting body is, what the fees are and the terms and conditions of payments. Research the qualification being offered to you, is the take up on the course high and if so what is the drop out and completion rate?

Find out if there is tutorial support and think about how much commitment is needed. You should also look at progression routes if you are looking to continue onto further study. Be really careful to research distance learning courses outside of Ireland/UK as unfortunately there are a lot of frauds out there offering courses that may be worthless. Many courses are now approved by FETAC and HETAC therefore further information is available on their websites. Distance education does not qualify for grants or fee exemptions, although tax relief is available. Tax relief for 2007/2008 can be claimed on tuition fees up to a maximum fee limit of €5000, in respect of the 2007/2008 academic year. In some cases up to 20% of course fees can be claimed back although students are advised to contact their local tax office as the course must be run from or in conjunction with an approved institution. For further advice on whether or not the course is accredited by an approved body contact the Department of Education and Science, your local Guidance project or AONTAS.

Jenny.

Need Answers?

Contact AONTAS on 01 406 8220, or visit our website www.aontas.com. AONTAS recently produced an Information Booklet for adults returning to education – give us a call and we'll send you a copy free of charge.

Champions in Education and Guiding STARS

The STAR Awards Ceremony was the opening event for the Adult Learners' Festival. In this article, Niamh Farren looks back to the ceremony and the eleven projects which received awards.

It's hard to imagine a more symbolic venue for the STAR Awards Ceremony. Dublin Castle is steeped in historical moments and ceremony. Back in 1921 Michael Collins was handed over the Castle on behalf of a new Irish government, while the Castle now regularly plays host to European Union Presidencies, Heads of State, and leaders of business, industry and government. It is also a major tourist attraction.

On February 4th, the Castle played host to quite a different audience - some three hundred representatives from the adult and community education sector. Adult education providers, practitioners, policy makers and learners all came together to celebrate the achievements not only of the eleven winning projects, but all the 131 projects which were nominated for the initiative.

A tour of the 'Reflections' wall in the exhibition space beside the room gives you some idea of the personal milestones and stories of achievements held within these projects. *'I'm the first one in my family to ever make it to university'* reads one. *'I always wanted to try but was afraid of making a big mistake. The Access course showed me that it would be difficult but that I could manage it.'*

Changing Times

The eleven projects themselves all reflect changing times in Ireland. The winners in both Dublin Local and Dublin regional categories both work with former drug users – they are Kilbarrack Coast Community Project and Soilse, respectively. Both projects are full of success stories of former addicts who went on to discover education as the key to unlocking their potential. A spokesper-



Waiting for the announcement, the audience at this years STAR awards

son from Soilse explained the kind of obstacles which face former drug users - 'age factors, lack of experience, absence of qualifications, and social prejudice.... coupled with personal fears, lack of experience, confidence and information, the transition from rehabilitation to follow on education, training or work can be extremely difficult.'

Each winning project is unique in its approach to meeting the needs of individual learners. In adult education the 'one size fits all' approach is quite simply not an option – with tutors having to manage the various social and cultural background that each learner brings with them. Take for example the Integrate Ireland Language and Training Project, which works with refugees and newcomers to Ireland. The programme has developed a real world approach to traditional English language training based on the theme of integration. In a class based on the theme of education, learners may find out about the education system in Ireland and tasks could include writing a note to their child's teacher, role playing a parent teacher



Micheal O'Muircheartaigh, RTÉ broadcaster and keynote speaker

meeting, researching available courses or joining a local library, depending on their own needs. The project includes a strong outreach component which meets learners where they are at.

Survival English, the winner in the Connaught Regional category, took the



Representatives of some of the Highly Commended Projects at this year's STAR Awards Ceremony

concept of adult literacy over the air-waves and adapted it to suit the needs of a new immigrant community in Castlebar. The result of a strong partnership between Castlebar Community Radio and the local VEC, this series of radio programmes is a true example of lateral thinking around the potential of technology in a rural area, transcending issues that might discourage learners such as transport or childcare. The series of programmes is accompanied by materials that help learners to learn at their own pace.

Education in the Community, for the Community

North Leitrim Women's Centre is one of three Community Development Projects winning awards this year, which goes some way to recognising the strong links between the Community Development programme and the adult education sector. The Centre has gone from strength to strength since its establishment in 1999, and in 2006 saw almost 2,500 women passing through its doors. The Centre recognises the importance of the social aspect to education, particularly in rural areas, and offers courses on anything from feng shui to farm management. Meanwhile up in Letterkenny, another Community Development Project received a local Ulster Star. The project prides itself on its inclusive approach through the direct representation and involvement of local people directly experiencing disadvantage on the centres management committee. Services initiated by the project include a 'Good Morning Letterkenny'

programme, which sees local volunteers make a daily phone call to older people who are house bound.

The third Community Development Project in receipt of an award is the Knockanrawley Parents Support Programme based in Tipperary. The programme includes an ambitious range of activities designed to support parents – these include anything from groups to activities which promote family learning. The group believes that isolation is one of the biggest barriers to parents living in rural Tipperary, and that bringing parents together enables them to learn from each other.

In Wicklow, another education project targeting parents was awarded the Leinster local STAR. This project is slightly different in that it focuses on the issue of intergenerational disadvantage targeting parents with literacy difficulties. The programme is even delivered in within the children's own primary school in order to break down barriers, and parents are involved in the design of the programme.

"Each winning project is unique in its approach to meeting the needs of individual learners."

Celebrating Diversity and Acknowledging What we Already Know

A conversation over Christmas dinner in Newtownabbey was the starting point for the Inter Community Partnership, winners in the Leinster regional category. 'There was very little social contact between Protestant Groups from urban Newtownabbey and Catholic groups North and South of the Border' explained a spokesperson from the group. Through organising exchange visits and educational activities which involve conflict resolution and local history initiatives, the project has succeeded in building trust and respect between both groups.

Dispelling ignorance of Down's Syndrome is the aim of the Shout Project which was given the Ulster regional STAR award. Competition in this category was so high that all of the other projects nominated were 'highly commended' by the judges. This particular project trains young people with Down's syndrome to act as advocates and raise awareness about Down's syndrome through the delivery of a training programme. This initiative has seen a group of fourteen young people deliver training to



L-R, Andrina Wafer (FETAC), Micheal O'Muircheartaigh, Brid Connolly and Seán Haughey

over 3000 professionals from the health, community and education sector.

Finally, in Waterford, a community education project where an academic qualification meets the needs of local volunteers who want to pursue employment in the community and voluntary sector in the area was awarded a Munster regional STAR. The course is strongly rooted in the philosophy of adult and community education – as a spokesperson explained *'you cannot teach anybody anything, you can only create the conditions in which they learn.'*

Champions in Education

This year saw the number of nominated projects rise to three times the amount of projects last year. The standard of applications was so high this year that the judges awarded thirty nine of the projects with 'Highly Commended' awards. The awards themselves this year seem to capture the spirit of the occasion – each one following a similar theme, but with its own unique features, and combining light, glass and vibrant colour. As Michéal O'Muircheartaigh so aptly concluded, *'we look forward to enlightened times for education in the years ahead with inclusion for all as one of the guiding stars.'*

It may sound like a cliché, but on this day, all are winners. This is not an occasion about competition, but about celebration, - whether it's celebrating the achievements of the projects making changes in their communities given minimal resources, or the individual stories of people overcoming huge obstacles with determination and persistence. 'Education has changed my world' reads one of the reflections. It's hard to think of a better reason to celebrate.

The STAR Awards Ceremony took place at Dublin Castle on February 4th this year. For more details on the projects nominated and photos of the event, visit www.adultlearnersfestival.com



Representatives from Soilse, winners of the Dublin Regional STAR Award

Keeping up the Momentum

Niamh O'Reilly explains the significance of CONFINTEA VI, an International Conference about Adult Education which takes place in Brazil in 2009.



Niamh O'Reilly with members of the IALLA Academy last year in Uruguay

Keeping adult and community education on the political agenda is important not only locally and nationally, but also internationally. Policy relating to adult and community education in Ireland is affected by international pressures; take for example the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) which was carried out in 1997. This report highlighted the issue that 25% of the Irish population were found to be at the lowest level of literacy. Since this report the numbers of learners undertaking literacy classes has increased four-fold and has brought the area of adult literacy to the fore. Globally, the adult education movement is trying to build momentum so to ensure that governments support, promote and invest in adult education. A key event that will renew this momentum is UNESCO's Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) which will be hosted by Brazil in 2009.

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) is coordinating the preparation of the conference, in cooperation with UNESCO Headquarters and Regional Bureaus and the CONFINTEA VI Host Country. CONFINTEA VI will be a UNESCO Category II INTERGOVERNMENTAL CONFERENCE. The conference itself as well as the preparatory and follow-up processes will provide platforms for policy dialogue and advocacy on adult learning and education within and across countries at

global level, with a large participation of UNESCO Member States, United Nations agencies and international Development partners, civil society, research institutions, and the private sector. The previous five CONFINTEA conferences took place in Helsingor (Denmark) in 1949, Montreal (Canada) in 1960, Tokyo (Japan) in 1972, Paris (France) in 1985, and in Hamburg (Germany) in 1997. CONFINTEA V, which was considered a landmark conference, established a holistic understanding of adult learning and education within the perspective of lifelong learning. Adult learning and education were recognised as key tools to address current social and development challenges all over the world. However, the recognition and strong commitment expressed in 1997 did not lead to the corresponding integration, policy prioritisation and allocation of resources for adult learning and education, either nationally or internationally.

Aims of CONFINTEA

CONFINTEA VI aims to renew international momentum for adult learning and education, and to redress the discrepancy between the insights and discourse on the one hand and the lack of systematic and effective policies and conditions for adult education and learning on the other hand. The CONFINTEA VI preparatory process, conference and follow-up will enable a global review of the state of the art of adult education and learning, and will serve as a sounding board for the most relevant and emerging political, cultural, social and economical issues in relation to international education and development. CONFINTEA VI will offer the opportunity to articulate adult education and learning with the major current international policy frameworks in relation to

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"CONFINTEA VI will offer the opportunity to articulate adult education and learning with the major current international policy frameworks in relation to education and development".

education and development: the Education for All (EFA) goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well as the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD), the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) and the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). Finally, CONFINTEA VI will engage in producing the tools (e.g. benchmarks) to ensure that previous and future commitments to adult education and learning are implemented.

The objectives of CONFINTEA VI are:

- to push forward the recognition of adult learning and education as an important element of and factor conducive to lifelong learning, of which literacy is the foundation;
- to highlight the crucial role of adult learning and education for the realisation of current international education and development agendas (EFA, MDGs, UNLD, LIFE, and DESD);
- to renew political momentum and commitment and to develop the tools for implementation in order to move from rhetoric to action. CONFINTEA VI will focus on improving the quality of adult learning and education as a field in itself, and concentrate on three to four priority issues.

In pursuance of the above objectives to advance the recognition as well as the horizontal and vertical integration of adult learning and education and the shift from rhetoric to action, CONFINTEA VI will aim at accomplishing the following results and products:

- Advocacy, political momentum and commitment for adult learning and education within and across countries generated;
- Synergies with the EFA, UNLD, LIFE, DESD agendas and the MDGs at national and international levels ensured;
- Links and interfaces with other areas (e.g. health, agriculture) created;
- National and international cooperation (between governments and civil society, bilateral organisations and UN agencies) increased;
- New national and international financing possibilities (e.g. commitment of international development organizations and south-south cooperation) developed and applied;

- Professional growth and quality in adult education improved; Empowerment of all actors (policy makers, professionals/practitioners, researchers, and the private sector, and adult and out-of-school learners) enhanced;
- Internationally applicable/adaptable tools (e.g. benchmarks) to measure progress and to ensure implementation produced;
- A final conference document (e.g. "framework for action") which includes the tools adopted.

The Role of AONTAS

AONTAS will engage in the preparation of CONFINTEA VI in a number of ways. Firstly, using the information gathered regarding the needs of our members we will feed into the National Reports. These reports will provide input for the conference and also for the regional European conference which will be held in Budapest in December 2008. Furthermore, this information will be the basis for the conference working document and the global report on adult learning and education. Secondly, through our membership to the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) we will contribute to the regional conference and finally the main conference in Brazil next year.

"CONFINTEA VI aims to renew international momentum for adult learning and education".

Making Adult Education a Reality in Lifelong Learning

The situation in south east European countries is particularly challenging for adult education. Bulgaria and Romania for example have the lowest participation rates in lifelong learning. In this way CONFINTEA represents a real opportunity to create a culture of lifelong learning in South eastern Europe.

A new project called 'Lifelong Learning Advocacy' will train adult education experts in the region for effective lobbying and advocacy work for lifelong learning at national, regional and international level. The aim is that these experts will be trained up, asked to build coalitions and networks with other actors at national level so to gather statistics on lifelong learning. The statistics will be analysed and reports compiled on each country. This information will be shared at the European CONFINTEA meeting in Hungary at the end of the year. The aim of all this work is to ensure that adult education organisations in South Eastern Europe contribute effectively in order to achieve the goals of CONFINTEA VI.

AONTAS will keep members up to dated on developments with CONFINTEA and how you can participate and contribute to the conference. For more information see <http://www.unesco.org/uil/en/focus/confintea.htm>

Diary of a Local Link

Grainne Kehoe: Local Link for the Adult Education Provider's Network in Dublin 8, writes about her experience as an AONTAS Local Link for this year's festival.



Playing Bridge at Whitefriar Community Council

As facilitator to the Adult Education Providers Network in the Dublin 8 area, I was nominated the 'Local Link' for the AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival this year. I have to begin by congratulating the participating groups on their efforts and co-operation.

We decided to have a Learning Safari or journey that would get local people visiting different centres to find out what's happening around the area.

My role was to encourage the different centres/groups to have a festival activity during the week of 4-8th February, a task they took on with great enthusiasm. We had Bridge classes, computer workshops, digital learning, story sack's demonstration, open house, intercultural exhibition and a fabulous cookery demonstration accompanying the 'Food Poverty on a plate' exhibition. While each centre participated in the Festival my role was to publicize the events and we had a 'what's on' guide and a map to accompany it which people found very handy. This was distributed to other service providers and projects in the area, hostels, community groups, library, local cafes etc. Coincidentally, Liberties College had their annual Open Day on 8th February and one of the return to learning groups agreed to make themselves available to talk to prospective students about their experiences. This was great as the voices of learners have way more impact than any brochure. I attended all the activities and was pleased to meet some of the same people at different Safari events. I think the advice of the AONTAS team to keep it simple was very valuable. We were able to provide a wide range of activities during the week to showcase the work of the different groups. Some used their exhibition as part of their FETAC requirements getting maximum value from their

efforts. It was fun and some of the groups reported that they had recruited some new learners as a result.

There was a great buzz in the area and I felt that participating in the Festival helped strengthen the links within the network and highlight the whole subject of adult education. Only one of the politicians replied to our emails so far but we'll keep the pressure on for Adult & Community Education to be kept firmly on top of the political agenda.

Would you be interested in being a Local Link in the future? AONTAS will provide you with some training and support materials. Contact Niamh Farren, Communications Officer on 01 406 8220, or nfarren@aontas.com



Ida Houlton at the Food Poverty on a Plate Demonstration, part of the Liberties Learning Safari



AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, would like to thank all those who made the ADULT LEARNERS' FESTIVAL 2008 a great success.

Over the week from February 4th to February 8th over one hundred events took place.

To all the organisations, individuals and local links who took part in the festival,

THANK YOU!

For more information about AONTAS, or to become a member, visit www.aontas.com

